DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 132 SP 038 208

AUTHOR Arthur, Julie; Darby, Sue; Campbell, Paul
TITLE Consorting with the Consortium: What the Researcher Saw!
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the International Practitioner Research Conference (2nd, Sydney, Australia, July 9-11, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Action Research; Change Strategies; Consortia; Cooperative Programs; Educational Change; Educational Improvement; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Participative Decision Making; *principals
IDENTIFIERS Australia

ABSTRACT

Australia's Cairns Consortium of Schools includes four state primary schools in Cairns, North Queensland. It supports provision of quality education characterized by improved student outcomes enhanced by improved teacher competencies. It is based on espoused values of mutual trust and respect. Principals use collaborative decision making processes to enact the Consortium vision of school-based reforms in teaching and learning. A key aim has been the development of teacher professionalism in the context of school-based reform. Through an action research evaluation, key factors in the Consortium school reform measures were identified. This paper outlines the research methodology, which involved action research, surveys, and case studies. The findings are discussed against a backdrop of school reform measures, focusing on decision making, the principals group, and dilemmas in actualizing change. The Consortium has successfully implemented change and enacted a vision of schools as places that can act cooperatively, share resources, and network to decrease teacher isolation. Analysis of the data revealed that there is explicit emphasis on the operationalizing of projects that address what the Consortium is about. While there are tensions in how projects can be implemented and managed, there has been no attempt to build a super school or to make the Consortium more than a collective vision. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 425 132

"Consorting with the Consortium: What the researcher saw!"

A paper presented at the

Second International Practitioner Research Conference

Julie Arthur (Australian Catholic University)

Sue Darby (Cairns Consortium of Schools)

Paul Campbell (Cairns Consortium of Schools)

Sydney, 1998

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Arthur

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Abstract

The Cairns Consortium of Schools is comprised of four state primary schools in Cairns, North Queensland. It was formed to support the provision of valid, worthwhile education characterised by improved student outcomes enhanced by improved teacher competencies. The group of principals use collaborative decision making processes to enact the Consortium vision of school based reforms in teaching and learning. A key aim for the Consortium has been the development of teacher professionalism in the context of school based reform. This has resulted in a paradox whereby principals wish to achieve change through collaborative school reform practices in schools where the culture has a traditional hierarchical view of management.

A partnership between the Consortium and a researcher from the Australian Catholic University was established in 1996. Through an action research evaluation, key factors in the Consortium school reform measures were identified. This paper outlines the research methodology which involved data collection through action research, survey and case study. The findings are discussed against a background of school reform measures. The presentation by the collaborative partners of principals and researcher will report on their perceptions of the process.

Introduction

The Cairns Consortium of Schools is a cooperative collation of four State primary schools in Cairns, North Queensland. The consortium is based on espoused values of mutual trust and respect, with the principals eschewing the competitive nature of schools as stand alone institutions. It was formed to *support the provision of valid, worthwhile education characterised by improved student outcomes enhanced by improved teacher competencies (Cairns Consortium of Schools, May 1995).*

Early aims of the Consortium were to

- maintain a flexibility of approach;
- allow teachers as professionals to develop their own work groups through which they can address key issues of significance;
- allow teachers to own their professional development;
- follow systemic imperatives of the Department of Education;
- enhance the outcomes for students.

May, 1995

The development of the Consortium is an example of major change in school practices driven by principals' not system imperatives. Instead of four schools operating independently and competitively, they have changed the dynamic to operate independently yet collaboratively. The schools operate as individual units. The Consortium operates collaboratively for the collective good of the schools.

What began as a loose coalition of support has evolved into a multifaceted educational reform endeavour. The current aims of the consortium are:

- to develop a professional culture which promotes productive partnerships for excellence in education;
- to reduce professional isolation of staff members through recognising and valuing their contributions;
- to develop networked teams to implement innovative educational practices;
- to support opportunities for staff members to initiate and implement workplace reform;
- to enhance the ability to enjoy work and have fun.

(Cairns Consortium of Schools Annual Operational Plan 1996)

Major initiatives of the Consortium have included:

- Professional development for teachers;
- Leadership development for administrators;
- Consortium curriculum consultants;
- Community support worker.

An action research evaluation was commissioned as part of a process of review of the Consortium. This paper reports on the research methodology and some of the findings of the first stage of the action research.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Literature Review

A significant feature of reform in school education is the devolution of authority to school management. Brady (1988) identified the individual school as the primary unit of improvement. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) argue that problems in school education are bigger than the school and that schools cannot solve the problems alone but must see themselves as part of the solution. This is particularly so if the education and learning of students are to be improved. Fullan and Hargreaves further suggest that key factors for school reform include:

- the dynamic complexity of teaching;
- the realisation that alliances and partnerships beyond the school are vital;
- teachers and students being continuous learners and effective collaborators.

School improvement and the development of effective schools cannot occur without reference to the complex nature and culture of schools. Ponder and Holmes (1992) suggest that traditional hierarchies must be flattened so that school sites can function as administrative collectives. Etheridge and Hall (1991) reported that the key outcome associated with school based shared decision making was that democratic leadership was the only leadership related to sustained increases in student achievement. Covey (1992) outlines characteristics of principle centred leaders as continuous improvement, radiating positive energy, service oriented, belief in others, see life as an adventure, synergetic and self renewing.

Bamburg (1994) reports that school leaders should develop a clear, educationally focused vision and a well defined mission statements, collaborating with school staff and community members to agree on core beliefs. Collective visions grow out of collaboration, teamwork and empowerment (Bamburg, 1994). Engaged and high performing teams thrive in a "learning organisation" where colleagues support each other in learning, risk taking, innovation and change (Senge, 1994). Urbanski (1995) writes that "we begin to build tomorrow today - and that if we can envision it, we can also achieve it." He further writes that any vision is only a pipe dream unless created twice: first as a mental image, then as the actualisation of it. (Urbanski, 1995).

Whilst the literature has key examples of studies of school leadership, there is little documented reporting of changes in interschool school collaboration. This paper reports on research that addresses this area.

Research Methodology

The evaluation methodology employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques within an overall emergent evaluation design in which the plan for collecting data depends on the data already gathered (Sadler, 1984). The evaluation plan changes as the evaluation proceeds in response to incoming information. Whilst some researchers call this method "evaluation specific methodology" (Scriven, 1981 in Sadler, 1984) others refer to it as cascading, rolling and sequential in design (Sadler, 1984). The evaluation methodology therefore takes on an action research cycle, in which the action for one cycle depends on reflection on the previous cycle. Action research involves critical reflection as an integral part of the research process and involves a cyclical approach to research of planning, implementing and reflecting, with further planning based on reflection (Kemmis and Stake, 1988). In this research action research was aligned with emergent evaluation with the plan for collecting data dependent on previous data collection.

Data in this research were collected through interviews with stakeholders, observation in schools and at meetings, and participation in discussions. Further data were gathered from the Consortium documents. This included minutes of meetings, conference papers, work place reform proposals, evaluations and publications. The cycle of research included meetings with the participants to report on the research data in a critical review of the findings.

Analysis

Data analysis involved a range of techniques. The interviews and meetings were tape recorded and transcribed to identify themes using Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Documents were subjected to content analysis to identify coherence with the Consortium goals and mission. Findings were reported in the first instance to the participants.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Participants

Participants in this research included administrative, teaching and ancillary staff across the four schools. Of the four principals, three are male and one female. Their experience as principals varied. All principals have served in rural and remote areas and all have experience with both Aboriginal and Islander communities.

Discussion

This section reports on selected findings from the first stage of the action research. Decision making and change dilemmas are reported.

Decision making

The process of decision making has evolved as the Consortium has changed from a good idea into a formal collaborative, collectively implementing school based management. The organisation of the Consortium decision making has variously involved a Principals group, a Consortium Management group and a Teacher Reference group. The principals group has been a consistent decision making group as this was the group in which the Consortium has had its genesis.

Principals Group

In its original formation in late in 1994, early 1995, the Consortium involved three primary school principals (Cairns West, Edge Hill and Parramatta). The principals group had three members and was a "think tank" for collegial support, providing a forum for the principals to discuss their ideas about changing schools. As experienced professionals they were full of creative ideas about how to make schools better places for children and teachers. The concept of a Consortium of schools with teachers and principals collaborating in teams developed from the principals meetings. When one of the principals was transferred to another Cairns primary school (Woree), it was thought that the Consortium concept would transfer with the Principal, however, the staff reaction of teachers at the school from which he transferred was against this. Therefore the Consortium expanded to include a fourth school and subsequently a new principal.

The Principals Group has had to survive the exigencies of transfers, threatened transfers, secondment to Higher Duties, deputy principals acting in principal positions for undefined periods of time, teachers acting as deputies and one school having no deputy at all. With each of these changes, membership of the principals group changed, and was extended when the principal on secondment to the Regional Office maintained membership of the group for the sake of continuity, knowing he would return to his substantive position. It was not until March 1997 when the Woree principal had returned to his school and the Deputy Principal from Edge Hill, who had been acting principal for over 12 months, was confirmed as the principal, that the principal group attained some stability of membership.

In the initial formation as an intrasystemic group to act collaboratively at an intersystemic level, the group met on a semiformal basis once a month. As the Consortium vision expanded, there was a need for more formal and more frequent meetings. This group is the ideas group where visions are created and dreams discussed. The collective synergy of the group is evidenced in their open and frank discussions during meetings. *We are a better consortium for the discussions and meetings.* The communication within the group involves frank interpersonal comments which to an outsider may appear derogatory. However the personal bonds are interwoven with professional bonds. The Australian cult of mateship is evident in the communication styles.

The principals group are the dreamers and schemers for school change and reform. When considering school reform they work firstly from the premise that although there has been change in an isolated ways in schools *more should be happening* to change the lives of teachers and children. They believe that teachers are in the main doing a good job. What the principals are on about is *doing the job better.* The second tenet for the principals group is that as a group they have a position of strength from which to *advocate for change.* In this they seek the common enemy of the traditional school organisation and management that constrains schools to act independently and competitively.

The success of any team requires different roles to be played. the principals themselves identity their collective strength as being their individual gifts and talents. Identifying themselves variously as ***kite flyers, ideas people, action oriented, process oriented, dreamers and schemers,*** they are aware of the dynamics that are involved in their successful operation as a collaborative group. The roles and responsibilities of the principals fluctuate and change depending on the initiatives undertaken.

For as much rashness as some bring, others bring the consolidation and making sure the steps are followed to get things through. It is balancing and part of the relationship. There is a need for some to make sure that things are carried through.

Principal

The challenge for the principals group is that raised by Urbanski (1995): first the mental image and then the actualisation of it.

Dilemmas in actualising change

Research data indicated that the consortium has been successful in the implementation of changes to school administration, school personnel and classroom practices. However the roles created as a result of change projects created dilemmas as a result of a clash in perceptions about hierarchical and collective leadership. Each of these changes resulted in roles which carried particular expectations from a Consortium perspective. When change occurs in schools such as has happened with the Consortium, the traditional formality of governance also requires change and redefinition. The Consortium staff positions are operated *outside of the square* and the traditional principal-teacher hierarchy was not applicable.

In schools, the relationship of the principal to the staff is important in the way in which the school continues to function as a coherent group. Principals are seen by staff as the "boss", the decision maker. However, when there is change in the way things have been traditionally done in schools, there is a challenge for those in the position of change agents to perceive the way in which they undertake their roles as being *outside the square*. If they see themselves as employees of an organisation viz. **the** Consortium, they may expect the traditional organisational decision making and behaviour that is typically found in Queensland State schools where **the** department is the employer. The employing authority is seen as an anonymous entity with whom one has little affiliation. The dilemma in implementing change is for those employed in Consortium projects to adopt behaviours for working in a collective and relational way rather than a hierarchical-subservient manner.

The role of change agents in the uptake of changes has been well documented in the literature. In particular, there has been a strong identification of the role of leaders and of team work. It is evident that the nature of the Consortium lies in the strong relational leadership styles of the principal group. The development of this group into an effective and lasting team of administrators has been the key to the Consortium success.

Conclusion

The Cairns Consortium of schools evolved from the perspective of principals for whom changes in the culture of schools were a must and not an option. The Cairns Consortium has been successful in implementing change and enacting a vision of schools as places that can act cooperatively, share resources and network to decrease teacher isolation. Data revealed there is explicit emphasis given to the operationalising of projects which address what the Consortium is about. Whilst there are tensions in how projects can be implemented and managed, there has been no attempt to build a super school or to create the Consortium as more than a collective vision. The Consortium is a construct and not a construction. As such it requires, and has, leaders of vision who can see not only what schools are but what they can be through school reform.

References

Bamburg, J. (1994). Raising expectations to improve student learning. NCREL Monograph.

Brady, L. (1988). The principal as a climate factor in Australian schools: A review of studies. Journal of Educational Administration 26(1). pp. 73-81

Covey, S.R. (1992). Principle centred leadership. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Etheridge, C.P. & Hall, L.A. (1991). Challenge to change: The Memphis experience with schools based decision making revisited. Memphis: Memphis university Centre for Research in Educational Policy.

Fullan, M.G. & Hargreaves, (1991). Working together for your school. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Administration

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Kemmis, S. & Stake, R. (1988). Evaluating curriculum. Geelong: Deakin University.

Ponder, G.A. & Holmes, K.M. (1992). Purposes, products and the creation of new schools. The Education Forum. 56. 405-418

Sadler, D.R. (1984). Follow up evaluation of an inservice program based on action research: Some methodological issues. Journal of Education for Teaching. 10(3). 209-218.

Senge, P.M. (1994). The leaders new work. Executive Excellence. 11(11). 8-9.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory, procedures and techniques. Newbery Park, CA: Sage.

Urbanski, A. (1995) Learner centred schools: A vision for the future. Educational Policy. 9 (3). pp.281-292.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE